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Insight and Outlook . . . By Joseph Kraft

The Technique of 'As If'

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THE RECENT WEEK of secret White House talks on Viet-Nam has been widely written off as a charade designed to provide an appearance of deep deliberation for decisions already taken. In fact, the White House talks yielded a basic change in the pace and direction of American policy in the Far East.



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President Johnson has now explicitly broken away from a policy that was leading to an early and direct military clash with mainland China. And he did it in a way that enabled all of his advisers to go along with the new policy, though most of them had been leading advocates of the old policy.

To understand the breadth of the decision, it is necessary to have a grasp of the strategic view of Asia held in the highest military circles. In this sophisticated and cogent view, the only threat to the American position in the western Pacific comes from Communist China. American superiority in the air and in nuclear weapons would make it relatively easy to handle China at present. But ten years from now it may not be so easy. China, the theory runs, could then be a real danger.

WHILE RARELY stated, this strategic concept has at all times been in the background of American decisions in Viet-Nam. The war there has been seen as an extension of Chinese power. At every critical juncture, this country has been obliged to go in deeper in order to contain the Chinese. Virtually all possible proposals for negotiations have been scotched as signs of weakness that would only feed the Chinese appetite for conquest.

The most recent White House review began just as all the previous ones. As usual, there was a military crisis in Viet-Nam. As usual, his aides went out to examine the situation. As usual, they came back to

commendations. As usual, these recommendations amounted to a deeper American military commitment. As usual, the President's chief foreign policy advisers, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk, endorsed the proposals.

For many reasons, however, the President was instinctively suspicious of the whole approach. His most important former Senate colleagues—Richard B. Russell, Clinton P. Anderson, J. William Fulbright, Everett M. Dirksen, Mike Mansfield—were expressing their doubts on the matter. The press was just then full of stories showing how President Kennedy had been trapped by his advisers in the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

BUT THE REAL art was not to have doubts. The real art was to communicate these doubts in a way that would carry weight with the President's military and political advisers. Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Johnson alone, achieved that trick. He did it by the device of posing what may be called "as if" questions.

He listened carefully to all the recommendations. He then asked his advisers to consider the situation, as if all the proposals had been adopted. What would the other side do then? And where would that leave the United States?

At one point, in fact, the President said: "I want every man in this room to think where we will be three months from now; where we will be six months from now; where we will be a year from now; where we will be five years from now; where we will be ten years from now."

When the answers to the "as if" questions finally came in, the President had on hand not only what he was being asked to do now, but also the whole scenario for the future. It was apparent that what the military wanted was: first, a major effort to drive the Viet Cong guerrillas out of South Viet-Nam; second, an all-out bombing attack on in the likely event of intervention by Peking, air raids on modern military installa-

back for at least a decade. A big Asian war, in other words, was just around the corner.

WITH THAT UGLY prospect exposed, the President's advisers were at last able to back away from the position they had endorsed so many times before. They agreed with the President that it was necessary to change the scenario. Though they accepted the immediate military requests, they also moved, for the first time really, to open a number of doors for a settlement in Viet-Nam.

The new moves may not work. They may not—and this would be tragic—be pushed very long or very hard. But for the time being the United States is not on a collision course with China. By the technique of "as if," the President has been able to assert the political over the military logic.

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